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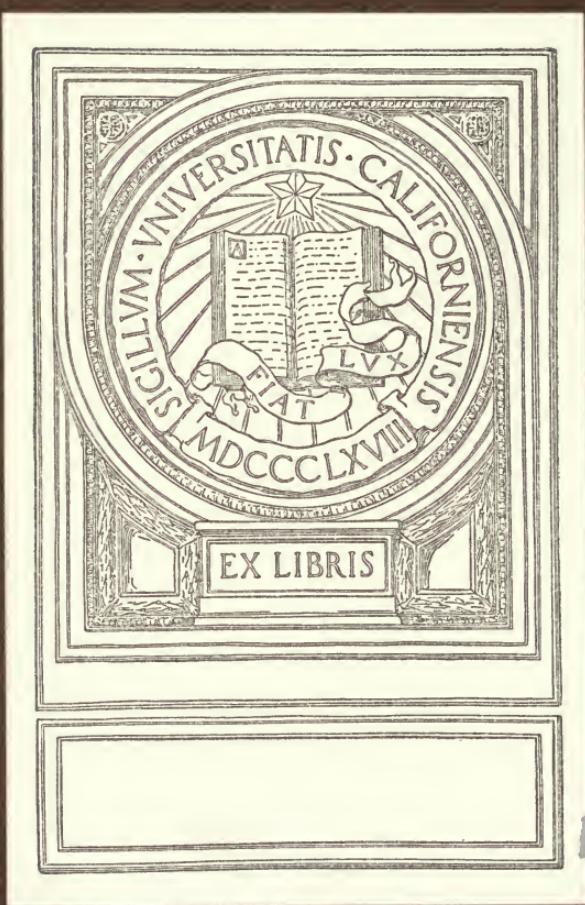
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COLONEL WILLIAM PRESCOTT,

THE COMMANDER IN

The Battle of Bunker's Hill.

HONOR TO WHOM HONOR IS DUE.

A MONOGRAPH,

BY FRANCIS J. PARKER.

BOSTON:
A. WILLIAMS & CO.

283 WASHINGTON STREET.

1875.

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To the Honorable JOEL PARKER, LL.D.

My Dear Judge:

*For the publication of this
Monograph you are as much responsible as I am, if
not more so; and your name ought, therefore, to accom-
pany that of*

Your kinsman and friend,

FRANCIS J. PARKER.

TO MINU
AIRAOVLIAG

P R E F A C E.

NOTWITHSTANDING the several discussions respecting the action at Breed's Hill on the 17th of June, 1775; its origin, conduct, and command; the contradictory views which have been and are yet entertained on the subject of the battle, would seem to permit, if they do not require, a further statement relating to it—particularly as to who was the commander of the Provincial forces engaged on that day. And this may appropriately fall to the lot of one whose ancestor was wounded in the battle, and in whose family traditions the true story has always been preserved.

The present writer has seen no account of that action which dwelt at all upon what has appeared to him a most important element in considering the question of command, namely: the evident unexpectedness on the part of all the American authorities of any immediate and serious engagement as the result of Prescott's Expedition; while it seems almost beyond doubt that Colonel Prescott, whatever may have been the original intention of General Ward, must have been of necessity left to command in the action; for its occurrence was so entirely unforeseen, and the crisis came so suddenly, that, when it came, all the energies of all the authorities were bent upon sending support to the original party; and if any thought was given to the fact that the commander of that party was not a general officer, it was outweighed by confidence in Colonel Prescott, strengthened perhaps by the thought which

in our day has crystallized into a Presidential proverb about swapping horses while crossing a stream.

Whoever writes on this subject will do well to receive with caution the opinions or testimony even of eye witnesses who were engaged in the controversies of the first quarter of the present century, and especially the honestly meant but utterly unreliable statement of Colonel Daniel Putnam, in 1825. Convinced that the interval of forty or fifty years must dim the memory of the soundest mind, even if the cloud which always comes with lapse of time is not made thicker by the mists of prejudice or controversy, I have preferred to rest my argument almost exclusively upon contemporaneous evidences. The dramatic stories of the battle, unheard of until more than a score of years had passed away, are piquant additions to the sedateness of history, but hardly reliable as authorities.

BUNKER'S HILL BATTLE AND ITS COMMAND.

By the first of June, 1775, the increasing numbers of the investing forces, and their improved organization, had begun to create discomfort in Boston. Every avenue except that by sea was absolutely closed to supplies. Cattle, hay and fuel, which the British supposed to be safe on the islands in the harbor, had been captured or destroyed, and the loss of them was severely felt—more severely because of recent additions to the numbers of the beleaguered army, requiring an increased supply of food and forage. In these affairs about the harbor several spirited skirmishes had occurred between the belligerents, and the result of them had been to give the Americans confidence in themselves, and to make the royalists more uneasy under their restriction. The British had therefore determined to occupy the Charlestown peninsula, which could easily be defended by works at the Neck, and the possession of which would give them considerable grass and pasture, and afford them another opportunity of sallying out by land.

Meantime the Committee of Safety, the Executive of Massachusetts, was earnestly pressing for a more vigorous prosecution of the siege, (1.) without much consideration of the lack of discipline or organization in their army, or the scantiness of the supply of ammunition; and, incited by the reported intention of General Gage to occupy Bunker's Hill, they urged General Ward—the commander of their own and the New Hampshire forces—to

1. Journals of Provincial Congress, pp. 543, 545, 554. Gov. Brooks.

“prepossess” and occupy it himself. (1.) It was a wise thing to do: for a strong work on the highest point of the peninsula would give the Americans such a foothold there as would not only bar the Neck to the passage of the British, but would also enable the besiegers at a future time to make such siege approaches to Boston as would render its continued occupation by the enemy dangerous, if not impossible. It was a pretty safe thing to do: for the summit of the hill was remote from the battery on Copp’s Hill, and from the deep water required to float the men-of-war; and it was too high to permit of such elevation of guns from the floating batteries as would seriously endanger the work or its defenders, while the formation of the ground was such as to make it easily defensible against any land attack.

The council of war which was assembled (June 15) to act upon the recommendation of the Committee of Safety, resulted in the order for the parade of Frye’s, Prescott’s and Bridge’s regiments, at six o’clock the same evening, “with all the intrenching tools in this encampment.” (2.) From these three regiments a thousand men were detached, to be commanded by Colonel Prescott, who had orders in writing from General Ward to proceed that evening to Bunker’s Hill, build fortifications to be planned by Colonel Richard Gridley, the chief engineer, and defend them until he should be relieved. (3.) This order did not contemplate a battle, nor did the supply of ammunition or rations indicate any intention beyond what appeared on the face of the order, namely: the outfit and defence of a working party, which within twenty-four hours was to be relieved by a garrison detachment. (4.) The

1. Letter of Samuel Gray to Mr. Dyer, July 12, 1775. “On Friday a resolution was suddenly taken to intrench the night following.”

Narrative of the Committee of Safety, July 25, 1775.

Massachusetts Provincial Congress to Continental Congress. American Archives. Committee of Safety, June 15, “Resolved unanimously that it be recommended to the Council of War that the above-mentioned Bunker’s Hill be maintained by sufficient force being posted there,” &c., &c.—*Journal of Provincial Congress*, p. 569.

2. Fenno’s Orderly Book, June 16.

3. Judge Prescott’s Memoirs.

4. Hon. Wm. Prescott’s Ms., quoted in Butler’s Groton, &c., p. 337, says the order of Ward to Prescott stated “that the party should be relieved the next

number of men assigned to the duty was sufficient to do the work, and no more than sufficient, and was probably determined by the limited supply of intrenching tools.

Colonel Prescott was no doubt selected to command the expedition as being one who favored it in the council, who was mature in years and judgment, and who, in the campaign at Cape Breton, had proved himself to be not only courageous but cautious. Military ideas then-a-days were crude among the Provincials, although they would seem to have been less dim upon the subject of precedence in rank and command than in due deference to orders. Instead of detailing three of the oldest Massachusetts regiments entire, in which case Colonel Frye would seem to have been by some six days the ranking officer, (1.) a detachment comprising the bulk of each battalion (and apparently every field officer except Colonel Frye) was ordered to report to Colonel Prescott. The attack of gout which afflicted Colonel Frye may have been a military "indisposition" *apropos* to the delicate overslaugh, but it is to his credit that, if so, it did not prevent his joining and acting with his regiment, under Prescott, when he found the next day that the detail for fatigue duty was likely to become a fighting brigade.

One or two hundred men of the Connecticut line accompanied the party, and served with it, (2.) no doubt by order of General Putnam, who was the only officer competent to make the detail in the absence of General Spencer, the senior Brigadier from Connecticut, whose station was near Roxbury; and the coöperation of this body was the only excuse for the presence of General Putnam with the party at any time.

These 1200 men composed the expedition, which, led by Col. Prescott, left Cambridge in the evening of the 16th, marched over

morning;" also, that in the morning the officers urged Colonel Prescott to send to headquarters to request the commander "to relieve them according to his engagement, as they had brought no provisions for a longer time, and had worked all night. This he refused." * * *

1. Frye's regiment was commissioned May 20, 1775; Prescott's, May 26; Bridges, May 27.—*Journal of Provincial Congress.*

2. Captain Chester's letter.

Charlestown Neck, and halted on the farther side. There the order was communicated. Its terms were clear and explicit, to proceed to Bunker's Hill and build fortifications. The ground had been reconnoitred a month before, by a joint Committee of the civil and military authorities of the Province, who recommended the construction of a strong redoubt on Bunker's Hill, with cannon planted there for the purpose of preventing any sally of the British in that quarter. (1.) The name described a specific locality, already occupied by the Provincial pickets—and hence the recommendation of the Committee of Safety, upon which the commanding General acted, spoke of Bunker's Hill as a position to be "kept," "defended," "maintained ;" while of Dorchester Hill, which was not within their lines, the same paper advised that possession be "secured." (2.)

After the action, the same Committee describes the field of battle, and the site of the redoubt, as Breed's Hill, and says it was chosen by some mistake. (3.) It was no mistake of the Committee—they recognized Bunker's Hill as "a promontory (?) just at the entrance of the peninsula at Charlestown," and say that it was determined, with the advice of this Committee, to send a party to fortify "the said hill." They quote the order given as one "to intrench upon that hill," and distinctly declare the fortification of Breed's to have occurred by some mistake. It was not the mistake of General Ward, who by written orders defined the place as Bunker's Hill. It was probably no mistake of Colonel Prescott, who halted at the foot of Bunker's, read his orders and acted upon them. He detached there Captain Nutting, with some sixty men, to picket Charlestown and the shore opposite Copp's Hill; (4.) and while they took the lower and direct route to their stations, Prescott, with the main body, ascended the slope of Bunker's Hill to its summit, the place where the redoubt should have been built. Here they were joined by the engineer, Colonel

1. Records of Provincial Congress.
2. Records of Provincial Congress.
3. Narrative of Committee of Safety.
4. Abel Parker's Statement in "Yankee" newspaper, 1818. He was a soldier in Nutting's company.

Gridley, by General Putnam, and possibly by another General, (1.) and here for a time the officer to whom the command had been entrusted debated with several others as to the execution of written orders from his and their superior.

When an officer is directed to fortify a hill, it means that his fortification is to include the summit of that hill. Prescott knew this, for under the orders he marched to the proper point, and apparently but for officious interference would have built his redoubt on Bunker's Hill. If he had originally intended to go on to Breed's Hill, he would not have detached Nutting at the Neck, nor would he have marched over the summit; but would for nearly a mile have followed the easier route which Nutting did follow, and would have diverged from it at a point nearer to his destination. Whether it was by error in judgment, or by intentional deviation, that the site of fortification was fixed at a lower level and nearer to Boston than the orders prescribed, the result was to change the whole character of the expedition. It was no longer a mere advance of the line of the intrenchments, or the fortification of a picket-post upon the existing line, but the construction of a detached work midway between the two armies, difficult of support or defence, and such a menace to the British army in Boston as to make the immediate capture of the works on their part a duty and a necessity. (2.)

It is impossible carefully to read the story of this 17th day of June, as told by documents and witnesses of the time, without reaching the conviction that a serious engagement was neither intended nor expected, as the result of the intrenching expedition. General Ward, the chief military officer, and General Warren, the Presi-

1. Gray's letter. It would be difficult to name any general except Putnam who would be likely to be there. It certainly was not Ward. Thomas, Heath and Spencer, were at Roxbury. Warren passed the night at Watertown. Folsom was absent. Pomeroy was no meddler.

2. Lieutenant Clarke's pamphlet (quoted in a note, p. 168, *Siege of Boston*,) states that it was in consequence of the firing of cannon from the fort that Gage determined to attack the redoubt. Peter Brown (1775), reflecting perhaps a general opinion among the men, says, "The danger we were in when discovered about 5 in the morning, made us think there was treachery, and that we were brought there to be slain."

dent of the Provincial Congress, were opposed to any movement likely to bring on a general engagement, (as well they might be, knowing that their magazine contained less than 1500 lbs. of powder,) (1.) and the carefully worded and written order of the General limited the objective to such an advance of the trenches as would effect precisely what was desired by the Committee of Safety, namely: preventing a sally in that quarter, and yet which would not encourage, much less invite or compel, an immediate attack on the part of the enemy. No general of Ward's acknowledged prudence would have sent out a party, intending that they should labor all night and fight a pitched battle the next day, without support. Yet neither Ward nor Putnam made any seasonable provision for reinforcements, except for a company of artillery to arm and man the fort. The orderly books show no provision for moving other troops. Stark was obliged, on the 17th, after receiving his orders, to lose two or three hours in providing and preparing ammunition, before he could move his regiment to Prescott's support; and he went into the fight with only fifteen rounds of ammunition. (2.) Captain Chester, of the Connecticut line, "was walking out from his lodgings just after dinner, (3.) quite calm and composed, and all at once the drums beat to arms and bells rang," and Captain Putnam rode by at full gallop, bearing his father's orders to march immediately to Bunker's Hill to oppose the enemy; and these Connecticut troops, General Putnam's own command, arrived only near the close of the battle, fully three hours later. Of course if an action had been anticipated, both Ward and Putnam would have had reinforcing parties ready organized, armed, equipped and supplied, at an early hour of the morning. The first detachment of 200 men from Stark was prob-

1. Committee of Supplies to Committee of Safety, June 17, 1775. — "We are sensibly concerned for the expenditure of powder; and as any great consumption by cannon may be ruinous on our side, we think it proper to inform you that, exclusive of 36 half barrels received from the Governor and Council of Connecticut [reserved for Connecticut army], there is only 27 half barrels in the magazine." — *Journal of Provincial Congress*, p. 570.

2. General Dearborn's statement, 1818. Authorities of this date must be received with caution.

3. Probably between one and two o'clock. The regulars were then landing.

ably intended as the promised relief for Prescott, and the garrison of his fort, then supposed to be on Bunker's Hill.

It may well be doubted whether Gen. Ward realized the extent of Prescott's variation from his orders, until Maj. Brooks reached him, at or near 10 o'clock, on the 17th; until which time, at least, he considered it more probable that the attack would be made upon his own unfortified position, at Cambridge. Then he saw the gravity of the situation, and hurried forward Stark with the remainder of his regiment; (1.) and, as the intentions of the enemy developed, he ordered on all of his disposable force, assembling them by beat of drums and ringing of bells, as if it were a case of unforeseen attack.

These troops, unbrigaded, but half equipped and not half supplied with ammunition, were with much delay pushed forward in the direction of Charlestown. Stark, with his command, and Reed's (N. H.), which was stationed at the Neck, arrived in good order and did good service; but, what with the haste and confusion of the march, the effect of mid-day heat on raw troops so circumstanced, and the raking fire at the Neck from the floating batteries, it is clear that but a small portion of the intended reinforcement actually reached the front, and the few who, after the arrival of the New Hampshire troops, actually came to the lines, did so in straggling parties and fell into the ranks with those who were already in position behind the defences. (2.) With them came Warren, Pomeroy and Frye, to serve as volunteers, neither of them claiming authority. The enemy were advancing on

1. Colonel Stark to Matthew Thornton, June 19, 1775: "Upon which [morning attack by shipping] I was required by the General to send a party, consisting of 200 men with officers, to their assistance; which order I readily obeyed, and appointed and sent [Lieut.] Colonel Wyman commander of the same. And about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, express orders came for the whole of my regiment to proceed to Charlestown, to oppose the enemy who were landing on Charlestown Point. Accordingly we proceeded, and the battle soon came on." — *Provincial Papers, N. H.*, Vol. VII. p. 522.

2. Captain Chester's letter, 1775. "When we arrived there was not a company with us in any kind of order, although when we first set out, perhaps three regiments were by our side."

Peter Brown's letter, 1775, estimates reinforcements at 500 in all. William Tudor states entire Provincial force at 800. Rivington's Gazette says 750 to 850.

the works ; the evident duty of all was to repulse them, and the first need was to inspire the troops with confidence to meet the assault. Generals and Colonels, as well as their subalterns, vied with each other in doing and saying what would encourage the men to stand firm, and for the time thought of no other duty or privilege as attached to their rank.

At the time the British troops landed, the Provincial defences consisted only of the redoubt and the flanking earthwork on its left, and the whole of the American force was the original command of Colonel Prescott, *minus* the number of those who, weary, hungry or frightened, had straggled to the rear, and *plus* Captain Gridley's section of artillery, and possibly the 200 men of Stark's regiment, under Lieut. Colonel Wyman.

To prevent the flanking of the works, Colonel Prescott took the only possible course, namely: the detachment of flanking parties from his own force. He sent the artillery, and the Connecticut men under Knowlton, to operate on Howe's right, and Lieut. Colonel Robinson and Major Wood to operate on the enemy's left. The latter probably occupied the houses in Charlestown, causing such loss to General Pigot as to seriously embarrass his advance, and to justify the burning of the town.

Just as Knowlton and Gridley issued from the fort, Stark, with his two New Hampshire regiments, came to the summit of Bunker's Hill. From that position Stark could see the British landing and forming at Moulton's Point to the left, the little group of Prescott's works on Breed's Hill, and the detachments issuing from it to the right and left. He could see that the great danger was that the British might get into Prescott's rear by way of his left flank. The attack seemed imminent, and he took in with the instinct of a natural soldier the whole situation, and briefly addressing his men, led them with cheers by a rapid movement down to the foot of Bunker's Hill, and there, in a few minutes, extemporized from two fences and the fresh mown grass an effective defence. Knowlton, seeing this movement, imitated it on Stark's right in such a manner as to form a nearly connected line from the redoubt to the Mystic river. Knowlton, however, appears to have had no grass

at hand, but he had the advantage of a natural ditch. (1.) The defences, such as they were, could hardly have been completed when the British made their attack.

There is no proof, and it is not probable that this formation was effected by order of Putnam, or of Prescott. Its origin was in the soldierly instinct of Stark, and it accomplished such protection of the left flank as Prescott had proposed to accomplish when he sent out Knowlton and Gridley,—and a better protection.

To estimate all this properly there must be kept in mind the imminence of the battle, the shortness of time, the excitement of the action, and the confusion of the succeeding retreat. At such times, and under such circumstances, minutes seem like hours, and hours like minutes, and there are few men who can correctly relate their own doings, and yet fewer who can describe what occurred about them.

It is worthy of note, that such works as were that day constructed on Breed's Hill, have been found to be the most practically effective defences in modern warfare.

Colonel Prescott, who commanded the original party, and whose men had built the earthworks, naturally continued to exercise immediate command over all the men at that, the most important point. Colonel Stark, whose men had extemporized the defences on the extreme left, as naturally commanded all who were there. Captain Knowlton, who with the Connecticut men finally took position between Prescott and Stark, (2.) may very probably have deferred to General Putnam, who was his regimental commander. Each of these officers—Prescott, Stark and Knowlton—recognized the fact that his was part of a general line, and each did what he could to support those on his flanks; and, after the action began, there was no occasion to give orders for changing the general disposition.

By order of Major-General Ward, Colonel Prescott was origi-

1. Chester's letter describes Knowlton's barricade quite particularly. He does not speak of hay, but mentions the stone wall and the natural ditch, neither of which is described by those in the New Hampshire line.

2. Chester's letter. "We joined our army (? Conn. army) on the right of the centre."

nally assigned to the command, and no order was issued to supersede him. If there had been supersession, it must have been by right of rank, such as Prescott acknowledged when he saluted Warren as his general; but Putnam had no rank in the army of Massachusetts, and could not command Massachusetts troops on Massachusetts soil, except by virtue of a positive order from the Commanding General of Massachusetts, if indeed he could even in that case.

Colonel Prescott led the column to Charlestown, and directed the men engaged in constructing the earthworks. He detached pickets, composed in part of Connecticut troops, visited them personally during the night, and recalled them in the morning. When the British were landing, he ordered Captain Gridley with his battery to go out and oppose them, and Captain Knowlton with the Connecticut men to support Gridley. (1.) He also sent Colonel Robinson and Major Wood to operate on the left of Pigot as he advanced, and thus actually exercised the attributes of chief commander night and day, not only in the redoubt, but outside, and over the whole front of the Provincial lines. When he desired to communicate with his commanding general, and to obtain men and supplies, he sent Major Brooks on foot to General Ward at Cambridge, (2.) which he would not have done had there been any intermediate commander; and Brooks carried the message through to Ward, although he met General Putnam on the way.

When General Warren appeared near the redoubt, "in the time of action," Prescott offered to surrender the command to him,—an offer which he had no power to make if Putnam was his commander; and the reply of General Warren, who was not only the ranking officer on the field, but was also the President of Congress and a member of the Executive body of the Province, was explicit and distinct: "The command is yours." (3.)

1. Colonel Prescott's letter, 1775, to John Adams. Chester's letter.

2. Governor Brooks' statement.

3. "In the time of action, Colonel Prescott, observing that the brave General Warren was near the works, he immediately stepped up to him and asked him if he had any orders to give him. The General replied that he had none, that he exercised no command there. 'The command,' said the General, 'is yours.' "—*Heath's Memoirs*.

Of those to whom the honor of the command has been ascribed, Prescott and he only was present from the first step of the march to the last gun of the battle. The engineer, worn out, forsook him—one regimental commander wounded, and one sick, could render him but little service, and the most of their men, exhausted with labor and fasting, had deserted the party—but upon Prescott was the burden of command. For him to falter, was defeat and disgrace to the patriot cause. As his subalterns succumbed to adverse circumstances, his zeal and confidence increased and strengthened. He would not ask for the promised relief, but only for food and reinforcement. When his raw soldiers hesitated in their work, under the fire of the British artillery, he mounted the earthwork, and, all exposed from head to foot, paced the parapet, and quietly continued his supervision of their work. The Americans who fought outside of the redoubt, fought in aid of and subsidiary to the defence of the fort where Prescott had stationed himself; and when he gave the order to retreat—an order which the Committee of Safety expressly state was given by "the Commander of the party," the battle was decided, and by that order its issue was declared. Upon leaving the peninsula, Colonel Prescott at once repaired to Cambridge and reported to General Ward, (1.) as a commanding officer should report to his immediate superior, and asked of him a new command of fresh men, proposing with them to retake Bunker's Hill, and to fortify and hold it as General Ward had originally directed him to do.

The result of the action was the defeat of the provincials. Instead of converting their advanced picket at Bunker's Hill into a fortified post, and thus getting absolute control of that outlet from Boston—which was the object and intent of the expedition,—the Americans had been driven from the position which they fortifi-

1. "On his return to Cambridge he immediately repaired to headquarters, where he found the commander in chief in great distress, apprehensive that the enemy, encouraged by their success, might advance on Cambridge and attempt to penetrate into the country. Colonel Prescott assured him that the enemy's confidence would not be increased by the result of the action, and offered to retake the heights that night or perish in the attempt, if the commander in chief would give him three regiments, with bayonets and sufficient ammunition."

—*History of Groton*, p. 338.

fied and had lost the whole peninsula. In the days immediately following that of the battle, certainly, and probably for many months thereafter, the Provincial authorities were inclined to speak in apologetic terms of the action. The Committee of Safety evidently ascribed the defeat to the mistake in proceeding beyond their lines to Breed's Hill. (1.) Mr. David Cheever ascribes it to the want of supplies and the shortness of time; (2.) and the recriminations among the officers found vent in courts of enquiry and courts-martial. When Colonel Prescott, in August, wrote an account of the battle, in a letter to John Adams, he takes occasion to say that he was ordered to intrench on Breed's Hill, and speaks in tones of complaint of the weakness of his subalterns, but he does not shirk the responsibility of the command.

Colonel Scamman testified that no general officer commanded on Bunker's Hill. John Pitts, a member of the Provincial Congress, wrote to Samuel Adams, within six weeks of the date of the battle, that no one appeared to have any command but Colonel Prescott. Peter Thacher, who drafted for the Committee of Safety the official narrative of the battle, expressly declares that Prescott commanded the *Provincials*; (3.) and General Ward, whose testimony alone ought to be conclusive, wrote to John Adams, October, 30th, 1775, "I think there has been no one action with the enemy which has not been conducted by an officer of this colony (Massachusetts), except that at Chelsea, which was conducted by General Putnam." At which last, by the way, Dr. Warren, the President of the Provincial Congress, was also present in person, and Putnam may therefore have been acting by special delegation from the civil authority.

General Putnam appears to have been a nervously active man, with plenty of personal courage,—one to whom constant motion was almost a necessity, and whose self-confidence inclined him to

1. Letter of Provincial Congress to Continental Congress, June 20, 1775, closes, "If any error was committed on our side, it was in taking a post so much exposed."

2. David Cheever to New Hampshire Congress: "New England forces were unprovided, by the shortness of time, for such an attack."

3. Cited in "Siege of Boston," from Ms. in possession of Am. Antiq. Society, Worcester.

meddle with whatever was afoot in the army,—but of little military skill. If, as is very likely, it was his urgent advice that induced Prescott to deviate from his orders, he must have felt a peculiar responsibility for the result, and he evidently did what he could to rectify the error; but it was too late. He was very earnest in his applications to officers and men to move the intrenching tools back to Bunker's Hill; (1.) and he made great exertions, not only to reinforce or otherwise assist the battle-line, but also to get the men, as they straggled by from front and rear, to work upon a redoubt at the summit of the hill. Nothing more clearly demonstrates the fact that he was not on duty on his rank than the small measure of success that attended his efforts. One of the few, if not the only one of the officers who was mounted, he was for that reason able to pass frequently from front to rear; and did so, going back two or three times as far as Cambridge.

A general commanding a detached party, especially on the eve of battle, does not abandon the field, personally to ask for reinforcements, or hasten forward supplies, or to give orders for turning out troops not included in the detachment: as General Putnam is said to have done. (2.) Colonel Putnam's account in 1825 (not very good authority), states that General Putnam was at Cambridge when the cannonade began (about sunrise); Major Brooks saw him between nine and ten, riding from Cambridge toward Charlestown; and again between one and two, while the British were actually crossing, Captain Trevett saw him going to and returning from Cambridge.

As a mounted officer and one whose person and rank were well known, he would be and was asked by new-comers as to the direction to be taken by them. But, excepting as any unattached officer might and naturally would, in time of battle, give orders to further the purposes of the action, it does not appear that he

1. Heath's Memoirs, 1798. Dr. Kittredge's letter, 1818.

2. Col. Daniel Putnam's letter, 1825. Captain Trevett, 1818. Governor Brooks' statement. Rev. Ezra Stiles Diary, 1775, quoted in "Siege of Boston." "Putnam was not on Bunker's Hill at the beginning, but soon repaired thither, and was in the heat of the action till towards night, when he went away to fetch reinforcements, and before he could return our men began to retreat."

assumed any command beyond the men of his own regiment and province. If he did, he was not obeyed.

The news of the battle of Bunker's Hill reached the Connecticut Committee of Safety on the 18th of June, at 10 o'clock in the evening. On the 19th the Committee advised the Governor to give orders to the officers and soldiers of Connecticut to yield obedience to the general commanding officer of the troops of Massachusetts, while acting in that province; and on the 20th such orders were issued. (1.) This action, by its date and its precipitancy, would seem to be suggestive of some serious and recent experience of conflicting authority in Massachusetts, and to make it absolutely certain that previous to that time, although General Ward might as a matter of courtesy between allies invite Putnam to his council of war, he could not command him or his troops; and however welcome might be his presence on any field of action, there was certainly too much intercolonial jealousy (2.) to make it prudent, perhaps even possible, to place him in important command over the best regiments of Massachusetts, much less to supersede by such an appointment a trusted and veteran officer of the Province.

Happily, on the very day of the battle, Congress commissioned a commander over the troops of all the Provinces; and the roar of the conflict on that hillside was the grand salute in honor of the General-in-Chief of the Army of Independence. But while we yet linger among the centennial anniversaries of the Provincial uprisings, let us carefully do justice to the heroes of those earlier days; and it is claimed that history, carefully examined, establishes the following points:

First. That the occurrence of the action on the peninsula of Charlestown was an unexpected event, and one for which no real provision had been made.

Second. That the cause of the action was in the deviation from Ward's orders to Prescott, and in selecting a position "too much exposed."

Third. That after the "mistake" had been made, and when

1. Am. Archives.

2. See Washington's General Order of July 4, 1775.

a battle became inevitable, Colonel Prescott was reinforced, but never superseded.

Fourth. That General Putnam, owing no obedience to the commanding general, and having no claim to rank in the Massachusetts army, could not have commanded Massachusetts soldiers on Massachusetts soil.

Fifth. That Colonel Prescott, who commanded at the redoubt the key of the position, to obtain or retain possession of which was the sole object of the battle, was the superior military commander in the action.

NOTE.

There has been a single attempt to prove Putnam commanding within the redoubt. It originated in a story purporting to have been told by Colonel Small, who commanded a detachment of Marines in the battle, and who is reported to have said that when the British troops advanced the second time to the attack on the redoubt, he, with other officers, was in front of the line to encourage the men; that when very near the works there came an irregular fire which was cruelly fatal; the troops fell back—he looked to the right and left, and saw not one officer standing—glanced his eye to the enemy and saw several young men levelling their pieces at him, and considered himself gone. “At that moment my old friend Putnam rushed forward, and striking up the muzzles of their pieces with his sword, cried out, ‘For God’s sake, my lads, don’t fire at that man! I love him as I do my brother!’ He was obeyed; I bowed, thanked him, and walked away unmolested.”

The story fails as proof—

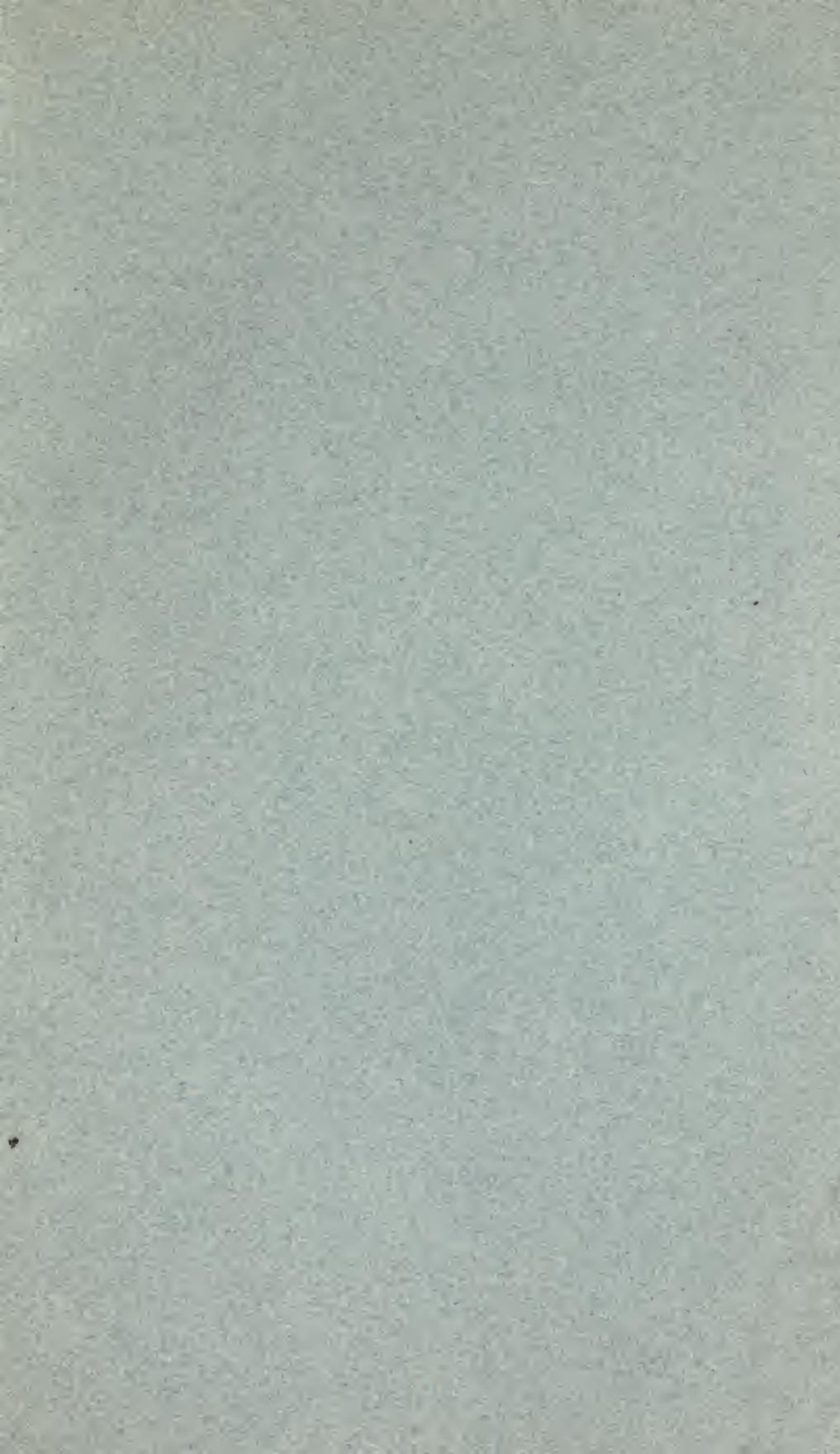
First. Because the language used by Putnam is that of supplication—of entreaty—not of command.

Second. There is nothing else in all the various accounts of the battle leading to a supposition that Putnam was within the redoubt during the time of the battle. It can hardly be supposed that Putnam was there merely for the purpose of saving Small, yet he is not shown by any one to have done anything else there.

Third. The tale is so utterly incredible that it carries on its face its own refutation. The “several young men” would hardly have been long enough in taking sight at an object so near (even if it was Small) to give time for any one to knock up their guns; and there must have been several other young men there, out of the reach of Putnam’s sword, who did not love Small.

The story presents a fine stage scene, but the provincials in that action were “terribly in earnest,” and were rehearsing no drama. It may do to “tell to the marines,” of which force Colonel Small must have been an honored commander, but it is not of such stuff that history is made.

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